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Remember Conservation When Making Planting Decisions

St. Paul, MN — Don't forget to check your conservation plan prior to making your final planting decisions this spring, says William Hunt, State Conservationist for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Minnesota. Since 1990 all USDA farm program participants who farm highly erodible fields are required to limit their crop production actions, including the crop rotation and amount of tillage used to produce their crops, to those listed in their conservation plan. "Farmers realize that practicing sound natural resource management is important on all fields. On highly erodible fields you should review your conservation plan prior to making changes in your spring cropping plans, in order to stay eligible for USDA programs," says Hunt.

With current high corn prices, some farmers in Minnesota are changing their current farming operation to include the planting of more corn in their rotation. The surge in ethanol interest and production has increased the demands for corn production. To meet the demand, farmers in Minnesota may be growing more corn in 2007. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recognizes the importance of market changes and profit margins, but reminds farmers of the need to continue protecting Minnesota's valuable soil and water resources. Producers preparing for tillage operation or rotation changes on highly erodible fields should visit with NRCS to ensure their soil and water resources—and their USDA program benefits—are protected and in place.

The magnitude of increased corn acres remains to be seen. According to Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Gene Hugoson, the largely increase in corn production will come from acres presently in a 50/50 crop mix of corn and soybeans. "Farmers may change to continuous corn or two years of corn followed by soybeans," says Commissioner Hugoson. "The fact is that growing corn on corn might increase the amount of tillage being done on a farm field as well as the amount of nitrogen needed or applied. Due to the high cost of nitrogen, farmers are apt to apply only what is needed."

"We don't know whether these market trends will continue and how land use patterns may change, but we should consider the long-term impact for soil and water resources," Commissioner Hugoson said.

No-till is more difficult to manage in corn following corn than in a corn-soybean rotation. Increased acres planted to corn would increase the acres where tillage and nitrogen application occurs and could have water quality impacts due to increased runoff or infiltration. Can we

increase corn production in Minnesota and NOT sacrifice soil and water resources? Fortunately, the answer is yes. In Minnesota it is possible if farmers use production practices tailored to the capability of the soil. Research shows corn can be successfully grown without much tillage. Producers need to take advantage of this knowledge.

According to NRCS, important decisions about field preparation for planting, tillage options, and crop rotations are key to achieving both production and conservation objectives.

1. Use a tillage method that conserves soil such as no-till, strip till or mulch till to plant corn after corn. When farming highly erodible fields, tillage practices are determined based on the crop rotation already in use or the rotation planned for future use.

2. Remember, your objective for soil protection is two-fold: you want to control soil loss to get your levels close to "T," the tolerable soil loss level, and you want to keep nutrients from fertilizer and manure out of surface and ground waters. There are many optional rotation systems, conservation choices and tillage methods that will meet both.

3. Rotations and tillage manage nutrient levels and offer crop residue for erosion protection. Use rotations to your advantage. Producers who want to deviate from the tillage practices listed for the common alternatives are strongly urged to consult with their local NRCS staff and discuss their operation and other options.

Additionally, farmers need to be alert to possible ephemeral erosion in their fields if tillage is increased. Ephemeral erosion refers to channels and gullies, from a few inches up to several feet wide that form in tilled fields after rains. Control of these gullies within highly erodible fields is also a farm bill requirement.

"Producers considering making the switch are already thinking about what corn can do to their bottom line, and they also need to be sure the changes they make continue to protect soil and water resources. There is much to be gained in this changing agricultural market," says Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Executive Director, LeAnn Buck "and we don't want to lose the strides we've made in conservation of the land. Just remember to keep "conservation" in the equation."

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